CHARGES AGAINST THE ARCHITECTS IN THE LATE WESTMINSTER SEWERS COMMISSION.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE TAKEN BEFORE THE SANITARY COMMISSION.

THE minutes of evidence taken before the Sanitary Commission contain one extraordinary feature, to which we are impelled to draw attention, even before considering the important statements they present on structural and sanitary questions. It is no less than a series of charges against the architects and surveyors in the late Westminster Commission, of a very degrading character. They take the shape, in some respects, of charges of ignorance, incompetency, and scandalous dishonesty, against the profession generally, but in that light are simply ridiculous. They are, in truth, however, charges against the individual architects and surveyors who were in the commission, and they demand, and will doubtless receive, an immediate reply: with which end in view we feel it our duty to extract the statements in question.

Mr. L. C. Hertslet, clerk to the Sewers Commissioners, was asked,—

"Do you consider architects, builders, agents, or persons in trade; or attorneys, and conveyancers in practice; to be persons who can be considered qualified to act as 'indifferent' (that is, impartial) commissioners within the meaning of the Act?—Certainly not. A person having a delicate sense of public duty would scarcely like, if he had a previous knowledge of the fact, to accept an office in which he could not act in an unbiassed manner without frequently offending his employers and customers; and in which, if he could not be tempted unduly to make friends, he would be sure to make bitter enemies.

Is there not a clause in your recent Act prohibiting commissioners from acting, when interested, under a heavy penalty?—There is a clause, but no penalty is attached to it.

How is it that the clause was so loosely worded? Who drew the clause?—The clause, as originally drawn, contained the penalty, but the Court of Sewers struck it out before it went to Parliament.

Is the effect of the clause apparent? Is it serviceable to protect the public?—I fear not. In a recent instance, when the chairman rebuked a commissioner interested for voting, he said he should do as he pleased, there was no penalty."

"Have you not fair reason to infer, and that constantly, connection, more or less direct, in the supply of goods or execution of works between trading and professional commissioners which you have no means of proving judicially?—I regret to be obliged to say that, among a certain class of the commissioners, private rather than public interest appears generally to be consulted. [Does this mean the *professional* commissioners?]

Will you give a few instances?—The following is one:—Prices are sent in to the surveyor by several parties; a commissioner calls and inspects them; on the following day or so, notice is received from one of the parties who sent in the prices (on whose premises the commissioner was seen after the inquiries at the office) stating that the price first sent in was an error, and substituting the price of the lowest tender. Again; I state in court (as clerk) that a certain notice has not been received from a public company, which, under their Act, they ought to have given. A commissioner, being an officer of that public company, leaves the court, and in an hour afterwards the notice arrives. I could pass in review the meetings of the court from time to time, and in the greater part of them I could cite something of that kind more or less palpable. I again repeat that I speak of a section of the court only. Unhappily, however, those commissioners who took the most active part in obtaining a fair hearing for the officers have not recently attended the court, and things are gradually resuming their former state.

Do the district surveyors interfere in those places where houses are being built, from the owners of which they will receive fees for superintendence?—Some of them in the new districts do, very much.

Can you give any recent instances?—I will give one out of several which occurred about the same time:—A speculative builder, on a large scale, applies to the court to provide him an outlet by rebuilding a sewer; the court decides that he must build the sewer himself, as what he imagined to be a sewer is only a road drain. The builder accordingly presents a petition for leave to build a sewer about 900 feet in length at his own expense, which the court grants: he, however, meets the district surveyor upon the stairs, who tells him that the court has decided wrongly, advises him to return and withdraw his petition, and persuade the court to build the sewer at the public expense, which was accordingly done at a cost of about 700*l*."

"Have the attendances of the architects, builders, and practising attorneys, diminished?—No; I think the reverse.

Does the dinner-party consist of that class of commissioners?—They compose the majority of it; without them it would soon expire.

Presuming the entire respectability of the tradesmen and professional men above described, can you say that any one of them had paid such special attention to the subject of the sewerage, and the connected questions of hydraulics, that if you were the owner of buildings, and had to expend your own money in works of drainage, you would apply to any of them for advice, or would intrust to them your own money for the purpose?—The pertinacious resistance offered by a certain class of architects to the recent improvements, and the extraordinary objections taken by some of them, astonished me, and convinced me that drainage is a subject to which they have not attended. In 1844 the question was referred to several architects standing high in their profession, and taking a prominent part at our court; and though they appear to have felt the necessity of a reduction of the size of sewers, they proposed a considerable addition to the cost per foot run, in order to have a granite bottom. They strongly recommended a sewer calculated to cost, at their lowest estimate, 16*s*. 4*d*. per foot run,—exclusive of the digging, which would be about one-third more. Mr. Cumberlege, Mr. Chas. Mayhew, and Mr. Pownall, however, assisted very materially in breaking up the old order of things, and in carrying through the new plans; but they seldom attend at present."

"From your own observation and experience, and judging by such examples, if you were the owner of property which required an extensive outlay, would you, if you were unaware of the possession of any special knowledge by them, intrust the outlay of your own money, even to a court or assemblage composed entirely of architects, any more than to an assemblage of tradesmen in the present ordinary state of professional knowledge and of common interests in the amounts expended?—From the experience I have had in the Westminster Court of Sewers, I should prefer to consult clear-headed non-professional men rather than architects engaged in the ornamental and fine arts department of their profession, and mainly because such men would be less prejudiced, and have less to unlearn."

Mr. John Phillips, surveyor to the court, examined.

"Which class of commissioners have been most strongly supporters of improvement?—Certainly not the architects, nor the attorneys connected with them. In saying that, I wish of course to make exceptions. Among large bodies there will always be found those who think and act for themselves without being biassed by the acts and opinions of others.

In what way do you find the commissioners of the class you speak of interfere?—In the first place, in the ordinary daily business, by personal solicitations to go out of the usual course to serve particular friends who are in trade or otherwise connected. Thus I have received notes from commissioners, asking me to oblige them by employing persons; and these notes bear, of course, but a small proportion to the number of verbal solicitations. The persons recommended may be very proper persons; but supposing they are not so, and they are refused, it is natural to expect displeasure from those commissioners. Then again, one is exposed to requests in respect to works in which commissioners or their friends are directly or indirectly engaged. The requests may appear harmless, but taking the whole together, they have a tendency to prevent the officers doing their duty discreetly. Clerks of the works have expressed to me the same sentiments. I wish to declare as a public officer, that as the commission is now constituted, I and the other officers have found it, and do still find it, impossible that we should do our duty as we ought to do.

Do you find the class of commissioners connected with building operations in the district favourable to economical works?—Decidedly the contrary. When I propose works of improvements which would save expense, I know from what side opposition will come."

Witness being questioned as to the use of certain materials, was asked,—

"By what class of commissioners was the court led to adopt the inferior material?—By the architects. It is the liability to vexatious interference in matters of detail like this which causes a great deal of the annoyance under a commission constituted as the present is."

He then makes a charge against an individual member of the court, for having insisted on the substitution of a less scientific plan for joining sewers, than one proposed by the witness.

Again, he is asked,—

"What class of commissioners opposed the adoption of your improved form?—Mostly architects and professional persons connected with building matters.

What objects may architects and tradesmen serve by maintaining uneconomical works? If I may say so, without intending the least disrespect to individuals, I should say that the architect is connected with and dependent upon the builder, just in the same way as among the inferior members of the medical profession the physician is dependent upon the apothecary who supplies medicines and recommends physicians."

[Mr. Phillips has more knowledge of the sciences connected with drainage than he has of the position of architects, or he would not have received the assistance he had from THE BUILDER in his progress, nor held his present appointment. To the statement of the opposition offered to him, we say nothing; we know it was true. Our observation applies only to the reason he gives for it.]

"What sized sewers has it hitherto been the practice to use in narrow courts, alleys, and short streets?—A sewer 5 feet high by 2 feet 6 inches wide, which is of sufficient capacity to drain 500 ordinary courts or streets.

Were those enormous sewers directed by the commissioners who were architects?—Yes; the forms were originally laid down by a former chairman."

To establish the charges, then comes *Captain Bayue*, R.N., who had acted as chairman during the last year. Being asked if he wished to make any observations on these examinations, reports of which he had read, the captain said—

"No, I do not: I think what I have read is a very well drawn up statement, both on the part of the clerk and on the part of the surveyor. I think, generally speaking, it is a manly, straightforward piece of evidence, which I think does them great honour and great credit.

So far as facts may come within your own knowledge there is no point upon which you feel inclined, from your own observation, to give any contradiction to the evidence which they have given upon oath?—I should say not. I have been a very close observer of the conduct of the Commissioners of Sewers. Gentlemen present must be aware that, looking at them as a large body of men collected together, and in a great measure connected with each other, it would be a hard matter to say anything more than the clerk and surveyor have said."

We do not reprint this evidence without compunction; but feeling that if the body of gentlemen attacked have not a sufficient answer to the charges, they deserve reprobation, and that if they have, as we sincerely and earnestly desire may be the case, it is desirable the opportunity should at once be afforded them of laying it before the public, we put aside our scruples,

And pause for a reply.

INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS.—On Monday evening Mr. Ambrose Poynter, V.P., will read a paper on Ornamental Leather Hangings.

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